

Report to Convocation *Spring Convocation, Part Two: Max Wyman*

The Report to Convocation on May 31, 1967, the second part of Spring Convocation at The University of Alberta, was made by Dr. Max Wyman, Vice-President, Academic, of the University. The text of his Report follows:

He said:

Eminent Chancellor—Throughout the history of universities, there has been a consistency of debate that now spans a thousand years or more. That the principal aim of universities is to discover, preserve, and transmit knowledge has seldom been disputed, but the best way to accomplish this aim has been the subject of constant controversy. The problems of university government now being widely debated are not new, and the question "To whom does a university belong?" is recurrent throughout the whole history of universities. It is a question that has been answered in a variety of ways by a variety of societies.

It is well known that, in the past, universities have been governed by church and by state. It is perhaps less well known that there have existed and still exist examples of universities under the control of the students or of the faculty. What is more remarkable is that in spite of the oft-quoted examples of undue influence, especially by church or by state, universities have been generally successful in accomplishing their aims and goals under any and all forms of government. Indeed, universities have pushed back the frontiers of knowledge unbelievable distances, and most of the dreams of yesterday, and some of the nightmares, are realities today.

In the written history of universities, it is possible to find in every generation a spectrum of opinion, ranging from everything is right with universities to everything is wrong. Currently, the everything is wrong opinion is illustrated in a series of articles, "The New Crisis in Teaching," that appeared in the October 1966 issue of *Saturday Night*. At the other end of the spectrum, an article by Rosemary Park, "Whose University" rises to the defence of the modern university. Roughly speaking, the extremes in this spectrum of opinion can also be illustrated in the works of H. G. Wells and R. L. Strout. Some fifty

years ago, Wells wrote, "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." Almost at the same time, Strout could proclaim, "... it was all lies—everything they taught me at school, everything they taught me at home." These extremes of opinion, old or new, we must reject, because the first is dangerously misleading, and the second is based on a misunderstanding of the meaning of knowledge.

The very real possibilities of gas, bacterial, and atomic war are all products of education. This is the reason that a kind of religious faith that the salvation of man will be found in education alone is so dangerously misleading. Indeed, the fact that universities cannot fulfil the utopian hope of Wells is the source of much of the modern criticism of universities. Students ask a university to give an enlightenment it cannot give. Society asks a university to reveal a biblical truth which will set us free, while all a university can offer is a truth that may well lead to the final and complete destruction of man. Governments ask that universities adopt a pragmatic view of knowledge, and call upon them to prove and prove again the economic value of higher education, a proof that is not always possible to give. A university is being asked to be what it cannot be and do what it cannot do. For quite different reasons, different elements of society build for themselves false pictures of an institution that seems to be failing to meet the needs of the society from which it draws its support.

Strout's opinion that everything taught consists of lies stems from the dictionary

definition of knowledge as the clear and certain understanding of truth. Knowledge is actually an unclear and uncertain understanding of truth, a truth that will escape detection by man till the end of time. Knowledge is an accumulation of information, some of which may be true and some of which may be false, that is gained by reasoning and experiment.

In order to see a university in a truer perspective, we must make a synthesis, in Hegelian fashion, of the spectrum of opinions already mentioned. This, I shall try to do today.

A university is held together by a common belief in an outright assumption that everything in the universe can be understood by the use of reason. The assumption itself may be true or false because there may well exist many things beyond the capability of the thought processes of man. Three forms of reason are used to generate and accumulate knowledge or information: deductive reasoning; inductive reasoning; and reasoning by analogy. All of these forms of reasoning are themselves based on assumptions of one sort or another, and like all assumptions, these particular assumptions may be true or false. This form of analysis, often called the scientific method, is used in almost every discipline taught in every university in the world today. The knowledge or understanding gained by this form of analysis is no better than the assumptions upon which it is based, and has the same properties of sometimes being true and sometimes being false. Over the years, man has gathered masses of misinformation. This misinformation is far greater in volume than is the knowledge and understanding that has withstood the challenge of time. In spite of this, universities need not apologize for, nor defend, their existence. As has already been said, the frontiers of understanding have been pushed back unbelievable distances, and more understanding will always come as long as universities continue to exist.

Knowing how flimsy is the basis upon which knowledge rests, it is the duty of universities to challenge continually the explanations of yesterday, knowing full well that our own explanations will fall to the

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challenge of tomorrow. This is the reason that we cannot give our students the enlightenment so many of them seem to seek. All that a university can do is to give its students a thorough training in the use of reason, with the hope that this form of analysis will enable them, in later life, to obtain the enlightenment that is so dependent on the element of time. The accepted truths of our day, currently taught in universities, are incidental to our major task. We agree with Strout that the accepted truths of today tend to become the lies of tomorrow. This is true now, and it will be true to the end of time. The work of man, in seeking truth, will never end.

Students today are moved by restlessness, a restlessness that is not new. Students are asking for a voice in university government, a request that is not new. Students should and will be granted their request, not because they are students, but because they are people, and people have ideas. My own discipline, mathematics, has always respected the ideas of the young. Indeed, many of the revolutionary concepts of mathematics emanated from men and women who had not reached the age of twenty-five. The classic example is Evariste Galois, a genius who, as E. T. Bell has written, was killed by the stupidity of his teachers. Twice in his life, during his

fifteenth and sixteenth years, Galois was refused admission to a university because his examiners did not understand the completely correct methods of proof he employed. Although Galois never spent a day of his life in a university, he left the world of mathematics a legacy of ideas that took over two hundred years to unravel and explore. All of this was accomplished by a young man who died at the age of nineteen in a duel over a prostitute. This was a waste of genius. This was a waste of a young man who had something precious to give. This was a young man to whom the world turned a deaf ear when it should have listened.

Students must not fear entering the world of ideas just because they are young. They must remember, however, as they gain their voice in university government, that they enter a competition for ideas with the thousands of men and women on the faculties of universities who have the same aims and goals, the solution of problems being forced upon us by mass education. Students must be aware that many of the ideas that come readily to mind have already been tested and been discarded. They must remember that they enter a world in which the standards of proof are high, and they must be prepared to meet those standards.

Let me conclude by attempting to answer that recurrent question, "To whom does a university belong?" In the physical sense, a university belongs to the society that provides the support necessary for the university to exist. Although a university has an important story to tell, there are other stories that must be told. For this reason, a society has the right to limit, or even withdraw, the support it now gives to its universities. This is the proper area of decision of government. However, in the intellectual sense, a university must be free. A university must be free to challenge, and sometimes disprove, the accepted orthodoxies of our day. A university must be free to consider and to develop concepts that shock the ethics and morality of our time. In this sense, a university does not belong to its students, does not belong to its faculty, and does not belong to society. In this sense, I must agree with Rosemary Park when she says that in normal times of peace, a university belongs and owes allegiance to no one. For this freedom, all that a university can promise is to leave our children the legacy of a world that is different from, not necessarily better than, the one in which we live. Only our children will be able to say whether that legacy is worth having.